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ABSTRACT

Joseph Harris, in his article, "The Rhetoric of Theory," talks about theory, or more appropriately, theorizing, problem-posing rather than problem-solving. In other words, the act of theorizing is more useful and meaningful when viewed and enacted as an activity that attempts to continuously interrogate and to suggest relationships and juxtapositions that complicate matters, rather than one that attempts to name, to fix, and to define boundaries. In the last 15 years, compositionists have engaged in dialogues that deal directly with issues of power and authority. As a means of fleshing out this concept, three issues relating to teacher power and authority can be examined. One issue looks at the giving away or taking back of teacher authority in the classroom. With the aim of liberatory pedagogies in mind, some compositionists devise practices that keep teachers from silencing students and instead help them to enhance the student's desire to write and think effectively. A second issue focuses on the relative powerlessness of compositionists within the academy. A third issue is more of a monologue than a dialogue--it consists of conservative criticism of writing instructors. If the participants in each of these three dialogues made references to the other two dialogues as a means of contextualizing their own, they would begin a process of thinking that could ultimately prove fruitful. (TB)

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Julie Drew

Politicizing Theory and the Act of Theorizing

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I'm going to talk today about the way we think of theory and the act of theorizing. I want to suggest one particular way in which the act of theorizing--the continual act of theorizing--might engender a re-imagining of ourselves as teachers, and thus a re-imagining of the relationship between students and teachers. This paper does not advocate theory as a means to pedagogy; in other words, neither the only nor the primary value of theorizing is in its potential applicability to the classroom as some engaged in the standard theory vs. practice debate have claimed. But having said that, I can't believe that a rethinking of what we mean when we call ourselves "teachers," and of what we imagine the relations between students and teachers to be will not somehow make its presence felt in our classrooms.

In "The Death of the Teacher," Susan Miller discusses teacher authority as it has been traditionally played out as either "inadequacy framed by desire"--the Socratic mentor-teacher--or as "invasively regulatory"--the manager-teacher, interested in control, and ultimately the death-knell for desire. Miller is convincing when she claims that we are neither empowered to play Socrates, nor to manage our culturally diverse students' motives and literacies. In the first scenario we can never quite measure up to the quintessential male mentor, whose underlying desires are today outlaw at the outset. In the second scenario, in order to "manage" our students for the state, they have to be imagined, as Miller says, as a "mass," a population identified, produced, and reproduced. This, of course, goes against the grain: where is "difference," or "agency," or

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"empowerment" for students in such a relationship?

Much of the pedagogical theory that deals with what the role of the teacher can and should be bases the weight of its discussion on students: their differences, their literacies, their agency. Such theories also tend to define and confine these issues to the classroom--or students' extra-academic lives as we imagine them to be; these are problems *about* students. And so we get busy with the work of defining, representing, and inventing students in ways that we hope will give rise to liberatory rather than authoritarian pedagogies, thus solving, or moving toward solutions of, our pedagogical inadequacies as we perceive them. In order to solve the problems about how to teach our students, we first must solve the mystery of who and what our students are.

If we assume a notion of theorizing as examination, however, mixing up, adding, and subtracting components and then re-examining, and then doing it all over again, endlessly as the social conditions around us change, and as we change, we will continually pose different problems. And even if these different problems remain unsolved and unsolvable, they create in us different ways of thinking about, different ways of understanding our students, ourselves, and our pedagogical and theoretical concerns. Theorizing which attempts to confine its speculative activity to solving a particular and clearly defined problem, however is already limited.

Let me give you an example. We often externalize our critical and theoretical endeavors, rather than examining our own positions within the classroom, the university, and the larger culture which in turn makes our attempts to negotiate relationships with students--who also inhabit those and other spaces--dishonest at best. As Miller notes,

talk of "my students," "my classes," "what *I* do" to a class as the teacher offers no "reference to exchanges or events that might effect the possessive teacher." Clearly the two possibilities of "teacher" as described by Miller won't do. And so, the death of the teacher. What do we do now? How do we re-imagine ourselves?

I would like to suggest that what we do now is theorize. Not the kind of externalized theory that gives rise to what we like to call "radical" pedagogy, or even the kind of theorizing that examines the complexities of difference in an attempt to help us deal ethically with the realities of multicultural student bodies. But rather, theorize ourselves as teachers, placed squarely within the institutional settings with all of their attendant power structures from which we operate.

Joseph Harris, in his article, "The Rhetoric of Theory," talks about theory--or more appropriately theor~~izing~~--as a methodology--problem-~~posing~~ rather than problem-~~solving~~. In other words, the act of theorizing is more useful and more meaningful when viewed and enacted as an activity which attempts to continuously interrogate and to suggest relationships and juxtapositions that complicate matters, rather than one which attempts to name, to fix, to define boundaries--and one which attempts to necessarily apply itself in the classroom on Monday morning. Much of the theory that gets done in composition studies is indeed--on a certain level, at least--problem-posing: how we might empower and teach critical thinking and writing skills to a diverse student population is one problem that gets posed, and quite often; there are others. We pose the problem of our labor concerns: issues of hire, promotion, tenure. At this level, we pose specific problems that come to our collective attention in specific arenas of our professional lives,

and in the posing is the theory. But on another level, a deeper level if you will, such theorizing is an attempt to fix and define particular discussions as solvable issues. Borders are constructed within which resides the matter of, say, "radical pedagogy;" within other borders resides the matter of our relative position within our departments and universities; and still other borders enclose issues pertaining to universities within the larger culture. All important concerns, to be sure. But what does it mean for each of those "issues" to be cordoned off from one another by our practical and theoretical divisions, by our refusal to complexify and continuously re-pose those problems? By our refusal to theorize our own complex and conflicted subject positions as sites where these many issues intersect?

Let's look at something specific to illustrate what I'm talking about. In the last ten to fifteen years, compositionists have engaged in dialogues that deal directly with issues of power and authority. As an example of the kind of theorizing, or problem-posing that I'm suggesting, I want to follow this thread of teacher power and authority, crossing the boundaries we've constructed that separate related academic concerns into hopefully solvable issues. One issue, or dialogue grounds its discussion in "radical" or "liberatory" pedagogy. This is a complex, multi-voiced conversation in which certain people argue for, among other positions, a notion of giving teachers' authority away in order to empower students--a deliberate move away from a traditional, authoritarian classroom model; other theorists argue that the teacher is always and irrevocably in the more powerful position. With the aims of liberatory pedagogies in mind, and the reality of multicultural classrooms, many compositionists attempt to devise and improve upon

practices that will supposedly keep from silencing students and that will instead enhance students' desire and ability to think and write critically and effectively.

A second dialogue focuses specifically on issues of "professional" concerns. This is a less complex conversation, although it, too, has many voices. The Wyoming Resolution and the subsequent CCCC position statement, the work of Susan Miller, James Slevin, James Sledd, Lynn Bloom, and others, have all helped to clarify the politics of composition's reliance on contingent labor as well as of the role of composition as a discipline within the academy. Many of the compositionists who participate in this dialogue see themselves as powerless, often within their own English departments, and certainly within the academy. The aim of much of this discussion of teacher power and authority is to organize politically and to act ethically in order to change that dynamic.

A third discussion dealing directly with teacher authority and power deals with partisan politics as well. This one is less a dialogue than a monologue, and it takes place in the larger culture outside of the academy. Teachers--English teachers primarily--are attacked in the popular press by members of the conservative right--I'm sure you all remember the George Will column last year--as left-wing radicals who are abusing their power to make curricular and pedagogical decisions to further their own political agendas--agendas that are portrayed as a threat to this country's moral and aesthetic foundations.

I'm aware, of course, that these brief summaries of three extremely complex scholarly conversations don't do justice to the depth and breadth of the work that has gone into them. Neither am I suggesting that these three conversations have not been

theorized rigorously--within the limited and limiting scope of the discussions themselves; what I am suggesting is that re-posing these issues, these problems, in new ways, making new connections and relationships is a valuable enterprise whether you find yourself firmly entrenched in the camp of theory or in the camp of practice. A debate about whether theory or practice is more valuable in composition studies is arguably nothing more than playing king-of-the-hill, and I mean this in just that masculinist sense. More valuable, it seems to me, is a reconsideration of what we do when we "do" theory.

What I find most interesting in this thread about teacher power and authority is that each of these three scholarly conversations is constructed by academics who put enormous amounts of effort into reading and writing them, and none of the conversations includes any substantial reference to the others. If we contextualize these three conversations, rearrange the problems we've posed by connecting the seemingly unconnected, put them in dialogue with one another, and so pose them in different ways, we expose academics' conflicting interests and desires regarding their relative power and authority within the classroom, the academy, and the larger culture, respectively. Let me be clearer: the first conversation discusses how giving away our power and authority might benefit students in our writing classes; the second conversation suggests that we don't have the power and authority that we deserve within the academy, and sometimes within our own departments; and the third conversation consists of claims by the conservative right, who have access to popular media and discourse which we either do not, or choose not, to have, that we abuse the power and authority that we most certainly do have. My point is this: as composition teachers and scholars, many of us move daily

from the classroom, where we attempt to deliver the kinds of pedagogies that we envision for students, pedagogies that require de-centering teacher authority, to reading and writing about getting more power and authority in the academic community--power and authority that we richly deserve, by god--to our recognition of the bashing we receive in our local and national periodicals. Each of these familiar knowledges and experiences is steeped in questions of how much power and authority we have, how much we should have, and how we might ethically negotiate such terrains for both ourselves and our students. And each is fraught with emotion: desire, frustration, anger. Do we really imagine that such complex negotiations and conflicts of interest, with their attendant emotional weights, don't enter into our relationships with students, and into our pedagogical practices? Into our ability to work in departments that still exploit our colleagues? Into our seeming inability to represent ourselves outside of the university and to value writing in non-academic forms that nonetheless might further our academic and political concerns?

So where does this leave the role of the teacher, besides dead, and relationships between students and teachers? We're left, I think, not with answers--probably with more questions, actually--but hopefully with new perspective which in turn gives rise to more theorizing, pedagogical and otherwise. Because if the subject position of university English teacher, based only on these three professional concerns for the sake of my illustration and limited time, is riddled with confusion, complexity, conflicts of interest, and endless contestation, and we not publicly and continuously recognize, examine, and theorize not only this notion but new and endless notions about such things, we are more

likely to reproduce the dominant culture and its attendant power structures, regardless of our articulated pedagogical and political intentions to the contrary. Thinking and writing about how a part-time composition teacher's feeling exploited by the English department, or feeling vilified by her local newspaper editor might be influencing her pedagogical practices, for example, might enable her to make more informed choices about those practices. Denying that such conflicts exist, refusing to recognize that we work within and for an ideological structure whose primary mission is culture reproduction, instead of learning to live and work within the unavoidable conflicts inherent in being institutional workers committed to projects of institutional change perhaps robs of us the agency to practice as well as to theorize.